

Matthias Flügge

The first pictures of his that I saw were images of obstruction. Pulled up very close to the viewer, metal hoardings and fences or stone walls push themselves into the often large formats of his photographs. The pictures cut the objects off on the left and right, and a narrow strip at the top and bottom, a small piece of sky and a sliver of foreground are the only clues to spatial situation in arrangements resembling the narrow stage back-cloth in front of the iron curtain in theater. A carpet, a patch of grass or weeds occasionally give a sense of perspective—traces of life resisting the pervasive sleekness. The gaze hits a brutal barrier made from one of the new materials so beloved by contemporary consumer architecture. These images could be read as abstract, constructive compositions in the style of *art concret*, if it were not for the sterile perfection that characterizes the materials in their virgin state, before they begin to age rapidly and without dignity. Any painting, however averse to expressing emotion, will always be more personal when it comes to materiality.

Hans-Christian Schink studied photography in Leipzig at an academy whose curriculum was unusually open-minded towards socio-analytical and documentary methods in artistic photography. Specializing early on in architectural photography, Schink is a master of his craft. His first publication is a black-and-white volume about Romanesque fieldstone churches in Prignitz, one of the poorer districts of Brandenburg. Schink resists all temptation to photograph his motifs as postcard beauties, instead recording the buildings with their clear and simple tectonics as sculptural bodies of magnificent proportion. He is far more interested in body and substance than in the state of the buildings, be they dilapidated or lately renovated.

Schink went on to publish a series of books about industrial architecture in the eastern German centers of Chemnitz, Dresden, and Leipzig, and worked for architects benefiting from the construction boom of the 1990s. As diverse as they may seem in their motifs and motivation—some he set himself, others were set by clients—the tasks Schink tackled have a common theme, namely, the upheavals and transitory conditions in post-unification eastern Germany. Change on an entirely unexpected scale became manifest in the transformation and development of a spatial situation whose architecture and landscape had grown organically. Determined by social factors as it was formed by human actions, it influenced human activities in its turn. Hans-Christian Schink's up-front angle on

this situation is characterized by cool objectivity. His pictures feature no people, no weather, no atmosphere charged with emotion, no look behind the scenes. Things are what they are, and that is the way they are at their most revealing.

In Leipzig the process leading up to reunification was permeated with revolutionary feeling. But unification was not the triumph of a superior economic system or even ideology, it was the result of the triumph of superior technology. Blindly holding on to industrial ways of production and the territorial limitations this entailed, therefore denying individual rights and the freedom of information, socialism as it existed in East Germany was doomed to ideological and material failure. The moral vacuum created by its collapse was filled by the post-unification boom years with all their Janus-faced ways. Hans-Christian Schink had just left the academy, and the topic was right up his street—his street in this case being the main westward traffic artery from Leipzig to Merseburg, now called Bundesstrasse 181. Development had just begun on what today is a suburban race track of consumerism, lined by DIY markets, cheap shoe shops, and Beate Uhse stores. In 1993 the German Werkbund in one of their books published Hans-Christian Schink's photographic series about this street. Anything but the report of an idle flaneur, it is a document of decay and of the absolute will to replicate the architectural, economic, and socio-political mistakes of the west in eastern Germany, if on a smaller scale. In panoramic and carefully composed images—not a living creature, not a car in sight—the photographs show built-up areas where nature is choked by an uncontrolled growth of glass and plastic panels. These pictures give a first glimpse of Hans-Christian Schink's photographic method. He carries his objectivity and alleged aesthetic neutrality to such an extreme that we cannot help but imbue his photographs with our judgments and feelings. And this is how the representation of construction comes to document destruction, its objectivity paradoxically revealing rather than concealing the photographer's pain. When the New Objectivity came up in the 1920s, there was no such leeway for interpretation. Bertolt Brecht was unaware of it when he noted down the much-quoted insight, occasionally attributed to Walter Benjamin, that "a photograph of the Krupp works or the A.E.G. tells us next to nothing about these institutions" because "actual reality has slipped into the functional." His diagnosis has long become a commonplace, with reality and the functional united in the ultimate terror of their intrinsicality. At least that is what happened on the arterial road from Leipzig to Merseburg. That is what Hans-Christian Schink is showing us.

Photography has not only gained recognition as fine art, but in the past years has virtually been posing as its leading medium. Our interpretation of its images therefore differs from what Brecht and Benjamin saw in the 1920s when they discussed the embryonic state of this development.

In the meantime, digital possibilities have extended the artistic range of the medium so far as to result in the disintegration of the classic photographic idiom. In the 1960s and 70s the international painting style known as Photorealism still utilized genuine photographic strategies, extending the optical limitations of analog photography by way of painterly craft. With their objective formal language, Schink's photographs of commercial functional buildings could also be read as an ironic mirroring of the media, in line with the kind of contemporary gallery photography that all too gladly evokes the aesthetic methods and canonical definitions of the history of painting. But for Hans-Christian Schink this is no more than a pose, soon abandoned in favor of a personal reflection of reality. He sees himself as a genuine photographer, who uses traditional possibilities of correction during the printing process, but does without digital methods of reproduction, and only in rare cases resorts to computer technology. It is not so much the emphatic evenness of his photographic idiom or the demonstration of the motifs' ambiguities that renders his work conceptual, but the precise reflection of the contexts in which the images appear—documentation, publication, exhibition, and book. In his complex photographic practice Schink differentiates between free and applied work. It makes a difference for the context of utilization whether an image has been created for collectors and museums, or at the request of investors or architects, who mostly expect a predictable and affirmative view. The artist however seeks to suspend his images between the conflicting tensions of distance and proximity, of nostalgia and the peremptory presence of the new.

Hans-Christian Schink's pictures of the Verkehrsprojekt Deutsche Einheit (Transport Project German Unity) take the functional conflict of photographic idioms themselves as the subject. They use the means of affirmation to voice criticism. And vice versa. Though they are without a doubt in a context of art, they could very well have been reproduced in an informational brochure. The photographer does not need to look for contradictions, they are already inscribed in his subject. For the monstrous title of the transport projects did not so much refer to transport for people as to transport of resources, be they material or human. The point was to consummate the annexation of the former East Germany on an infrastructural level. Streets had to be built, bridges had to be reconstructed or

modernized, train lines had to be drawn and rivers had to be made navigable. Apparently tired of their critical instances, the people of eastern Germany believed Helmut Kohl when he promised “blooming landscapes” which, however, have so far failed to bud. But at least the existing landscapes were thoroughly excavated. Job creation, investments, subsidies, tax breaks—the full program of state intervention in the economy was poured into the gigantic project, which had been devised as a bid to raise living standards in eastern Germany to the western level, but had sadly overestimated its own strength. One could say that it was the German vision of unity poured in concrete, a symbol of the end of mutual curiosity about different ways of life on either side of the inner-German border. Mobility as a promise and a value in itself, however—that somehow seemed plausible to us easterners, accustomed as we were to bumping into walls rather quickly in the past. We had yet to learn at what price mobility comes.

Hans-Christian Schink realized this early on. What a theme! Picking it up was a logical decision for the photographer who had earlier examined the reconstruction of eastern Germany. While Schink previously concentrated on houses, that is, human dwellings whose outside reflects human activity, his motif now is purely functional architecture, formally modest but nice and big. Very big. Its function is movement, not the kind of permanence for which houses are built. Its function is transport, transport above all else. And transport usually bypasses the people whose view its infrastructure obstructs. Schink gives us pure, metaphysical images. But his metaphysics are not those of de Chirico, revealed under the glistening skies of the south. The German version appears under the gray high fog of winter. Schink gives us images of the emptiness that otherwise only Ulrich Wüst finds in German cities in his black-and-white photography, images of alleged eternal promises, images with deep horizons, images of routes, holes or strange sculptures of pillars and the broken arches of unfinished bridges. They are photographed in such a way that it does not make any real difference whether we see scenes of construction or demolition. People are absent, only rarely does a machine loom into the picture. This could be anywhere in the world where there are trees, grass, and winter. Nevertheless, the German location is clearly recognizable. The autobahn still is a German motif. It goes back to the 1930s, when the National Socialists sought to conceal military goals behind promises of work and mobility; it was adopted by Socialist Realism and imbued with its characteristic pathos; and also surfaced in West German photojournalism as it documented postwar reconstruction. With the exception perhaps of the wonderful title song from the

German band Kraftwerk's 1974 album, the autobahn never was the subject of elegies. It seems we have wised up.

Hans-Christian Schink shows the destruction of nature in the form of its mythical appearance, well aware that the presence of human labor inevitably turns nature and landscape into cultural phenomena. His pictures reflect an insight the Romantics had just as modernity set in, and regarding them, we begin to understand what Heinrich von Kleist meant when he said that Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* made him feel as though his eyelids had been cut off. Another allusion to Romanticism is the window motif, where we look through a frame to see landscape revealed as a cultural construct of the human gaze.

These clear "elective affinities" bring a new quality to Hans-Christian Schink's photographic work. He is never satisfied with historicizing. The often hidden references are not samples of technical or intellectual virtuosity, but anchor the images in the history of art, endowing them with a more encompassing contemporaneity.

As all of Hans-Christian Schink's photographic cycles, the *Verkehrsprojekte* have a beginning and an end. In between are approximately 250 photographs, the quintessence of which has been distilled into this volume. All of them show buildings under construction. The element of incompleteness, the sense of open-endedness and precariousness that the buildings emanate despite their sculptural monumentality, conveys an idea of the stresses and strains still affecting the process of unification. This makes the images exciting and lifts them far above cheap cultural criticism or the disconcerting nostalgia for East Germany whose commercialization through mendacious kitsch is proving a veritable goldmine. Beyond the specifically German context, the *Verkehrsprojekte* thus address the process of civilization itself. The euphorias of modernity have evaporated. In Schink's images, so-called progress has been put to rest. This could be a sign of hope.